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REVIEW OF COESTER'S  
"THE LITERARY HISTORY OF SPANISH AMERICA"

By  
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1871-1934

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Reprinted from the ROMANIC REVIEW, Vol. VIII, No. 2.

[New York 1917]



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## REVIEWS

*The Literary History of Spanish America.* By ALFRED COESTER, PH.D. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1916. 8vo, pp. xii, 495.

Of all the huge areas on earth occupied more or less by civilized folk none has been accorded relatively so scant an international recognition as the region south of the United States. The several countries and their inhabitants have been surveyed with an eye to economic exploitation and measured in terms of political incapacity, but in most other respects they have been left out of consideration. In this realm of omission the absence of regard for purely intellectual achievement is conspicuous. And yet this is just the factor in the life of the southern peoples of the New World which the foreigner must learn to appreciate, if ever he hopes to understand them. Still more is the statement true if he wishes to act as their spokesman or interpreter. Without such an appreciation of the things of the mind and the spirit, Pan-Americanism as a form of international fellowship will continue to be a stock feature of postprandial effusions and little else.

So far as abundance of material is concerned, no one able to read the English language need go hungry for certain kinds of information about the eighteen republics of Spanish origin. Their fortunes or misfortunes as colonies, the vicissitudes through which they have passed as independent nations, and the opportunities they offer to the business man, the publicist and the scientist, have all been laid under contribution with varying degrees of success. But the number of works that endeavor to mark the stage of intellectuality reached by the Spanish Americans is extremely small. If the seeker after knowledge of this sort strikes off from the common highway into the bypaths of thought and imagination, he promptly discovers that his ignorance of Spanish is a bar to further progress. When, therefore, a kindly guide appears to lift the bar and proffers a helping hand, the service is one that calls for due acknowledgment.

This service has been rendered by Dr. Alfred Coester in his *Literary History of Spanish America*. It deserves recognition, both because of the intrinsic merits of his work, and because of the fact that it is the first book on the subject in any language. The story it tells is lucid, readable and instructive. The work possesses also the unique interest that always attaches to the deeds of the pioneer. Accordingly its merits and its defects alike should be discussed at a length proportionate to such interest, and with the candor that its qualities justify.

In his preface Dr. Coester apparently accepts the judgment of Mitre, the Argentine statesman, historian and poet, that, in spite of their copiousness and the bond created by a common language, the writings of Spanish Americans do not constitute a Spanish-American literature (page viii). The argument on which this thesis rests is, that the writings in question have no logical unity and afford no evidence of an "evolution toward a definite goal." From it the conclusion follows that the literary productions of Spanish Americans are properly to be regarded, "not as models, but as facts, classified as the expression of their

social life during three periods, the colonial epoch, the struggle for freedom, and the independent existence of the several republics." On such an assumption the plan of the work has been constructed. Its contour is moulded along the broad lines of political history.

Realizing, however, the undesirability of making his characterization of Spanish-American writings quite so rigid, Dr. Coester observes (page viii) that the judgment to be rendered on the value of Spanish-American literature depends entirely on the point of view from which its study is approached. If the critic holds that the productions are merely a branch or suborder of the genus Spanish, or that they are largely an imitation of French models, he is thinking of form and not of substance. Both the significance and the originality of Spanish-American literature, on the contrary, spring in spontaneous fashion from the difference between the situation in the New World and that in Spain or elsewhere in Europe; they are characteristics that rise naturally out of the history and the language, out of the geographical phenomena and the social life, of the countries with which they are associated. Accordingly, while the form has been more or less imitative successively of Latin, Italian, Spanish and French patterns, and has followed the varying phases of the classical, romantic and naturalistic schools, the subject matter in the main has been original (page x).

With reference to the difficulty of securing in this country the materials needed for his labor, Dr. Coester emphasizes the fact that the library of the Hispanic Society of America, and that of Harvard University, are the only ones that contain really valuable collections of works by Spanish-American authors. Though bibliographies, biographical encyclopedias, historical sketches, essays and anthologies abound, it is only in the cases of Argentina, Venezuela and Uruguay that histories of their respective literatures have been written. Even these are defective in various ways. Given the character of his sources of information, the author frankly admits the possibility that he may have misjudged some writers, and have left out of consideration others well worthy of inclusion.

The precise function of the present work is declared to be that of guidance for "an English-speaking American . . . who desires a better acquaintance with the mentality of his Spanish-American neighbors." Since what it describes is an "extremely provincial type of literature," great masterpieces need not be expected. What one may hope to learn, instead, is the effect produced on Spaniards by their removal to the New World, the mental and psychological differences between national types, and the reason for revolutionary disturbances. Greater respect, also, may be gained for countries that have struggled for freedom and stability, and a corresponding appreciation won for the deeply religious sentiments of the peoples concerned, even if nothing more is noted than the Christian names of the men of literature (pages x, xi). Whether the work fulfils all these expectations the reader will have to judge for himself.

According to the choice and arrangement of his material, Dr. Coester evidently has linguistic Spanish America in mind. This is made to comprise both the region formerly under the dominion of Spain and the various political or geographical units in which Spanish is still the dominant speech. The first three chapters and the closing one deal with the broader concept, and the intervening ones with the individual countries, or with groups of them. Since the conditions of life under the rule of Spain, and the community of aims during the struggle for independence, imparted a certain similarity to literary productions, one

chapter is allotted to the colonial period and two to the age of the revolution. These make up about one fifth of the volume. Then, since the attainment of freedom enabled each country to pursue "its own course in literature as in politics," the literary contributions of the individual republics, together with Puerto Rico, are described in ten chapters, eight of which deal with Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Cuba respectively one treats Peru and Bolivia, and one, collectively, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and "Central America"—the last being a designation for the six states situated there. The final chapter is devoted to an account of the "modernista movement" in Spanish America at large. A bibliography and an index conclude the volume.

So far as the literary scope is concerned, the limits of the book are declared to be such as to "allow only a casual mention of the most important works of purely historical or scientific content. Periodicals, on the other hand, have demanded attention because, as the means of immediate publicity . . . , they have often played a considerable rôle . . . and now supply the investigator with much material" (page xi). In both the geographical and the literary sense the proportions are quite well distributed, except that Paraguay is omitted altogether, Bolivia is dismissed with a paragraph or two, and the account of the colonial period is unduly brief.

The objects, plan and scope of the work having thus been indicated, the precise nature of its contribution to knowledge is now to be discussed. At the outset the reader familiar with conditions in the countries under survey is disposed to ask why Dr. Coester chose the title "Literary History," rather than "History of Literature." Quite apart from the point whether or not he believes that there is no such thing as "literature" in the region concerned, and apart also from the avowed limitation of scope, he does not state specifically his determination to include chiefly products of the imagination alone. The implied distinction he makes, therefore, between "literary" and "literature" is not entirely obvious. If it has to do with the difference between works in which expression and form, associated with ideas of permanent and universal interest, are essential features, and writings that are designed solely to furnish information, he restricts the definition of the word "literary" to limits that are somewhat unusual. Ordinarily not history alone, but biography, essays and the criticism of literature, are regarded as "literary" productions. The Spanish Americans themselves, when treating the development of thought and imagination in their own countries, "usually include a consideration of historical writings" (page xi). If so, were Dr. Coester thoroughly familiar with what often passes for history among them, he might not have put most of it outside the pale of works of the imagination! The same could be said, also, of the voluminous mass of political writings, many of which are apt to impart less knowledge of concrete affairs than to reflect mental and psychological moods or attitudes, and to reveal besides a talent for rhetorical eloquence frequently beautiful in diction. At all events his plea for allowance, "on account of the character of his sources of information" (page xi), is hardly sufficient to cover his omission of such writers as Carlos Calvo and José Ingenieros, and his extremely brief allusion to José Toribio Medina and José Enrique Rodó.

What the work really supplies is an introductory record of achievement mainly in the fields of poetry, romance and the drama. It provides a more or

less appropriate historical background, biographical sketches of many of the authors cited, a descriptive outline of their chief works, and some characterization of the literary output of the countries concerned, and within the limits chosen. On the other hand, as a rule it does not indicate the sources of a given work, its nature, its qualities and the actual position it occupies in the intellectual productivity of the area under consideration. What the volume does furnish, instead, is a series of biographical and descriptive items and not a critical evaluation of literary accomplishment, of types and characteristics, of the phases through which they have gone, of the influences, alike foreign, national and local, by which they have been affected, of the spirit and of the trend of a people's mind and soul as revealed by their literature. General characterization of the writings of a particular country is rarely vouchsafed. In its absence the reader has to construct it out of data scattered through the chapter. Just in what the literary genius of Spanish America at large, or of any part of it, really consists, in what kinds of intellectual endeavor a given state excels, are features none too clear in the body of the work.

Only when the chapter on the "modernista movement" is reached, and the tacit help of Blanco Fombona's writings has been invoked, is a systematic effort made to trace the development of foreign influences on Spanish-American thought as a whole, or on that of any Spanish-American country, to point out what is inherently Spanish American, what is derived from Spain, France or other European states, or from other lands in the New World itself. But even here, after the reader has traversed the literary vicissitudes of so many separate countries without being enabled adequately to realize how much or how little they were interrelated, suddenly to be told in the first sentence of the chapter in question that the "year 1888 may be adopted to make a date for the most recent movement in Spanish-American literature" (page 450), is a bit disconcerting. The serious student cannot help starting to grope for the "Spanish America" he left at the close of the third chapter. Nor is his feeling of bewilderment lessened when, on further perusal, he can discover no explanation of how the term "modernista" originated, and has, besides, to compose a definition of it out of statements scattered through pages 450, 451, 467, 468 and 473.

Perhaps none of the desiderata above mentioned is properly to be expected in a "literary history," as distinguished from a "history of literature." In that case, and to the extent that the omission of any of them is permissible, the reviewer is simply stating what he had hoped somehow to find, regardless of the indication carried by the title. That his quest was not rewarded in the measure of his assumptions, therefore, would be a circumstance not attributable to any fault of the author, but simply to a licit divergence of opinion between the author and the reviewer—who, on his own part, does not pretend that an acceptance of his views is indispensable for the attainment of perfection! Neither should they, nor the observations to follow, be regarded as partaking of the nature of harsh or meticulous criticism, for nothing of the sort is intended. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to protest a bit at the assortment of names and titles which the volume provides, distant though such an assortment is from the array that a Spanish-American writer, subject to a like temptation, might have presented. Dr. Coester, surely, could have kept some of the lesser lights extinguished and, instead, have advanced the greater ones to a higher luminosity by



turning on more power in the elaboration of his descriptions in individual cases, and also by furnishing the reader who does not understand Spanish with a larger number of translations from representative works. In other respects, however, the susceptibilities of this kind of reader are quite scrupulously heeded.

Given the absence of any express statement that the volume is designed to serve merely as an introduction to the subject, the difficulties of discovery and control of material to which the author alludes in his preface might seem to render the covering of so huge a field a venturesome performance. It would have been wiser, perhaps, to have selected for treatment one country, or at the utmost a group of countries affiliated in a more intimate manner than their fellows. That the larger task has been attempted is a tribute doubtless to both the ambition and the good will of the author; but its effective realization was precluded from the outset when once it is considered that many of the works themselves were not available for his personal examination, and when it is obvious that he has never visited the region from which they come. Everywhere in the volume not only the language used but the way in which the works are approached would seem to show that in most cases dependence is placed upon histories of literature, accounts of intellectual development, biographical sketches and anthologies written or compiled by Spaniards and Spanish Americans. The frequent mention of the names of critics and their opinions, and impersonal statements such as "little praise is accorded" (page 116), evidence an indebtedness, for facts, descriptions and estimates, to the writings of other scholars which should have been directly avowed rather than left to the implications of the text itself. Apposite footnotes would have been decidedly serviceable in this regard, though practically none is given. While it would be unfair to assert that the work is mainly a translation of excerpts from Spanish writings, historical and critical, arranged in a form suitable for readers of English, it can hardly be averred, either, that the task of original investigation has extended very far beyond a compilation of that sort. Useful though the text is, it displays quite often a lack of personal handling and evaluation of the works under review.

It is true that the "broad lines" of political history have been taken "as a guide through the maze of print" (page viii); but those lines on a good many occasions are rather crooked. Due allowance of course must be made for the fact that the work is not a "history," except in the "literary" sense. Even so, the frequency of errors and dubious statements (pages 3, 5, 6, 13, 30, 40, 41, 46, 52, 62, 77, 79, 83, 103, 104, 125, 245, 261, 304, 431, 444) would suggest the desirability of a more accurate antecedent knowledge of the historical background. For example, the first book printed in America was the *Escala Espiritual*, and neither the title nor the authorship of the one mentioned on page 5 is correct. Histories did not "make up the bulk of what was written about America and in America" during the colonial period (page 6). Of the eight sentences constituting the second paragraph on page 40, seven are quite erroneous. The form of government which the rebellious colonies set up was surely not "that of a democracy" (page 41). Neither Markham nor Mitre is always a reliable mentor in matters where absolute impartiality is a requisite (pages 46, 52). The correspondence of Bolívar, as edited by Blanco Fombona, is far from "voluminous" (page 77), except in the Pickwickian sense that the selections offered are contained in a single volume! García Calderón's work, though in a meas-

ure "authoritative," hardly includes the "whole history of Latin America" (page 261). In fact it is not primarily a history at all. Whether Spain had any such policy as that of "maintaining the creoles in ignorance" (page 304), is exceedingly doubtful. The Dominican Republic (not "Santo Domingo") is situated in the eastern, and not in the southern, part of the island of Haiti (page 431).

Several matters not of historical import call for comment. Foreignisms, or odd expressions, occur on pages 5, 7, 14, 20 and 23. The meaning of the last sentence on page 75 is obscure. Just why literature in Venezuela "reflects the progress of its people toward a higher state of culture," any more than it is apt to do in most countries, and why the periodical should have been any more serviceable as a literary vehicle there than elsewhere, are queries that the text on page 305 might naturally evoke. There is something wrong, also, about the physical identity of Ima-Sumac (page 30). The story about Doña Dolores Veintemilla de Galindo, told on page 212, is repeated with little variation on page 269. "Cartas de relación" (page 485) is not the name of a periodical. The name "Philip" is repeatedly misspelled, and the orthography of "Guadalupe" (pages 80, 490) is plainly incorrect. Typographical slips occur on pages 27, 221, 477, 478, 483 and 485. Cartagena de Indias was the name of the Colombian city (page 69); O'Donohú was that of the last viceroy of New Spain (pages 83, 491); de Rosas, that of the Argentine chieftain (page 106); Chíncha, that of the islands off the coast of Peru (page 214), and "del Uruguay," the termination of that of the "República Oriental" (page 169). The accentuation, furthermore, of Spanish names is far from being either uniform or correct. If New Spain is called "Nueva España," assuredly the second syllable of "Peru" and the first syllable of "Mexico" should have an accent. Alike in the text, the bibliography and the index are found such examples of misplacement or omission of diacritical marks as Álvarez, Leon Valdes, Ines, Lópéz, Ituzaingo, Academia, Merou, Amerique, America (as a Spanish word), Martir, Melian, Alvaro, Mexia, científico, Saenz and Salome. The system of capitalization adopted in the bibliography, also, might be revised to advantage.

At the beginning of his bibliography (page 477) Dr. Coester states that the names of "only those books most useful to the student" will be given; but he affords no explanation as to the criteria by which the selection in this field, so novel to the reader of English, has been made. Treatises in Spanish, recent and having a high degree of usefulness, like those by Sánchez, Santos González and García Godoy, are not mentioned. Even the "old faithful" Lagomaggiore is ignored. Something more than García Calderón's work is needed to supply a non-literary background. The colonial period, certainly, does not suffer from a surfeit of titles, and the same is true of some of the individual countries. It might not have been amiss, also, to have alluded to earlier treatises in English on Spanish-American literature, as, for example, those by Ramsey and Currier.

For additional information about Spanish-American authors and their productions, Dr. Coester refers the inquirer to an article of his published in the *ROMANIC REVIEW*. On this point, however, it might be suggested that the interests of such inquirer would have been served better if the portions of that article bearing on the subject matter of the present volume had been inserted in the bibliography. A complete list of the authors mentioned in the text, of the titles, dates and places of publication of their works, would have been a valuable

accessory on the spot, not only for the purpose of facilitating references, but as a means of impressing more graphically on the reader's mind the actual extent of Spanish-American contributions to literature. So, too, a list of the productions of Spanish-American writers which have been translated into English would have been altogether desirable. The index, finally, should have been made to include the titles of individual literary works, and the names, also, of the several countries of Spanish America.

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